

WELCOME TO YINDEE

Memories of making *Wake in Fright*

Somebody once said: “No-one ever sets out to make a bad movie.” By the same token, no-one ever sets out to make a classic – unless it’s Stanley Kubrick, who likened making movies to trying to write *War and Peace* in a bumper car at a dodgem park.

The term “Australian classic” has come to be increasingly used to describe Ted Kotcheff’s *Wake in Fright* – and if we accept the possibility that it is, we may well wonder how come.

Which of its components might lift it out of the rank and file of Aussie films? Is it the source material, Kenneth Cook’s trenchant novel ... is it Evan Jones’s script ... the producers’ input ... Ted’s direction ... the cinematography ... sound ... the performances or the expressiveness of the music score and editing? The answer is, of course: “You betcha.” And saying “You betcha” actually points us towards another element which, I believe, should never be underestimated in film making. And that’s serendipity – good old fashioned luck!

In my involvement with *Wake in Fright*, lady luck made three major visitations and I’d like to briefly enumerate them for you.

The first happened along in the person of Jack Thompson. Jack and I were cast to play underground miner best mates, Dick and Joe, on a Christmas bender. We were told much later that he’d been chosen more for his acting chops while I was selected because I could potentially handle the chopsocky – the rough stuff called for in the script.

The question mark over my participation was whether as a designated ‘stunt type’ I could deliver the lines satisfactorily. Anyway, the powers that be decided to take a punt and Jack and I met at our first rehearsal.

Back then Jack wasn’t the avuncular, grand old man of Aussie films & TV that he is now – and where lady luck smiled is that he turned out to be as keen to excel at the fight stuff as I was to nail my lines.

The routine for the biff-up at the Yindee Hotel, where drunken horseplay turns nasty, was choreographed on the layout of the set and approved by Ted. Jack and I then spent some time going over particular moves on protective matting at a local gym.

Luck was still hanging around when the sequence was shot.

It’s a complicated scene. When you see it in the film, Donald Pleasance’s Doc Tydon is in the foreground delivering his “Socrates” monologue to Gary Bond’s John Grant – who keels over dead drunk – while Jack and I spar in the background. The fight then turns serious and Doc

switches his attention to us, we wreck the front of the pub and end up wrestling in the dirt like lovers – foreshadowing the fate of a drunken Grant at the hands of the profligate Doc.

Due to technical difficulties and the demands of the scene, the whole thing had to be shot over two nights – ultimately requiring 36 takes, or repetitions, of the main fight routine. At any time, a miscued punch or misjudged fall that resulted in injury could have caused a far more serious delay. But with dame fortune on our side, we came out of it totally buggered but with no more than falling-around bruises. And if the sequence works, you'd better believe that by the end we had it down pat.

Luck was also an extra passenger in the car driving stuff.

As described in both novel and script, the roo shooting car is a yank tank – a big V8 of the type with which Detroit's love affair is only just now ending. John Shaw, the location manager, had got hold two Ford Fairlane 500 V8s with sunroofs – late 50's models with automatic shift, slack steering and supersoft suspension. They were a pretty, two-tone pink and would have suited Doris Day, except their boots were modified timber boxes intended for carrying roo carcasses – which might have discouraged Rock Hudson.

These dream-mobiles drove fine on bitumen but were totally unsuited for off-roading. However, there's no mention of hard driving in book or script so John Shaw was perfectly justified in his choice. And there were two for security.

The first time one was used was in the sequence where Jack and I drive up the dirt road to Doc's shack. I did a couple of practise runs at varying speeds for camera. Ted liked the faster one because of the dust it produced.

So on the first take, I planted my foot and the vehicle fish-tailed up the drive to pull up at Doc's door in a billowing cloud of dust. Ted was ecstatic – and the die was cast. From there on in, the only direction he ever gave me regarding the driving was: "Keep it going", and I tried to oblige.

Stunt vehicles are normally prepared with reinforced underbodies, roll bars, special seat belts and so-on. The Fairlanes had nothing. Well, they'd been fitted with dinky lap belts that we couldn't use anyway because they inhibited movement inside the car. Once we got out on the plain – chasing kangaroos through the mulga with Donald and Gary on board – it became barely organised mayhem. A camera and sound recorder that we could switch on when we found a good patch for a burn was set-up inside the car. The ad-libbing you hear is a dubbed approximation of what we were yelling at each other without the involuntary expletives.

The cars paid the penalty. From sump to tailpipe they bore the brunt of the abuse. John Shaw had to cannibalise one car to keep the other going. He was not happy. Towards the

end of the car segment he said to me quietly something like: “We don’t have another driveshaft, mate, if you stuff this one too.” And he didn’t mean ‘mate’ in the friendly sense.

Maury Singer, the American Associate Producer, wasn’t happy either. His main talent, Donald and Gary, were hot-rodding it around the boonies like a couple of crazies. Jesus wept – what if something happened? But nothing did. The car, and our luck, held up to the end.

Lastly – and most serendipitous of all as I see it – was the Nelson episode.

Nelson was an anonymous wild kangaroo, blind in one eye, who had been captured for the production and was being held with other roos in a large enclosure. By the sheerest of luck he won his freedom, his name and is featured in the film’s closing titles.

How that happened was that on the night the kangaroo fight sequence was scheduled to be filmed, two large boomers were taken to the set and drugged with varying dosages of tranquiliser by a local vet in order to make them tractable. One after the other, they went into shock and died. This took a little time to happen and the night was beginning to slip away amid doom and gloom with nothing in the film can. Tempers were fraying rapidly.

I went out with Jacko Jackson and co in the ute to see if we could find another roo of suitable size. Way in the back of the compound we spied Nelson, the catcher dog ran him down and back to the set he went. The tranquiliser experiment was well and truly over, so just the way he was, Nelson was tied to a stake in front of camera and we started filming the shot of my walking up to him.

He didn’t react too badly – perhaps his limited vision helped him tolerate the lights and movement – and the first stuff we did was surprisingly OK. Then he had to be untied because he couldn’t move properly and a couple of enterprising crew members kept him in shot by hanging on to his thick tail.

You see me waving my hat around – that was to get him to react. By now I was talking to him between takes and a relationship was beginning to form. I found that if I flapped the hat across his good eye, I could get him to rear up and paw at me. Then, if I quickly moved across to his blind side he’d settle down. With only one person holding his tail, he was able to jump forward and get me backing up with well-aimed paw swipes. Finally, when he attacks the hat, you see me get behind him and grab his upper body. That move was made on his blind side. I doubt it would have worked with a fully sighted roo.

When Ted yelled “cut” on the last take, the relief on the set was so tangible you could slice it with a knife. With appropriate cheers and hand-claps, Nelson was taken to the front gate and turned out into the night a free roo – and rightly so. At the height of the euphoria, Ted Kotcheff said: “I’m gonna give that roo a credit.”

And he did. Loud and proud, the end titles conclude with: ‘Nelson – the fighting kangaroo’.

Jack once pointed out to me that in the opening credit sequence of the film, if you look carefully, Ted has placed his own Director's credit over a shot centered on the cover of a rock album of the day prominently titled *Blind Faith*.

Blind faith was certainly rewarded here. A figuratively one-eyed director saved by a literally one-eyed kangaroo. Blind luck for both.

So how do I feel about it all now? Well, I find I'm a lot less complacent about the fate of the other animals these days, the kangaroos that weren't so lucky – the ones that were killed.

The death of the two kangaroos drugged by the vet could be charitably called an accident – so could that of one mindlessly hit by me with the roo car and that of the hapless little fox on the Yindee set by a crew member firing live rounds near it to make it run.

But the spotlit kangaroos filmed being shot were shot so their deaths could be filmed. The disclaimer at the end of *Wake in Fright*, the 'Producers' Note', attempts to validate this. If I ever granted it a measure of credence, I certainly don't now. It's pure, unalloyed spin.

The 'historical' depiction of actual harm being deliberately done to people or animals may find a place in a documentary, but in filmed entertainment it rapidly becomes exploitation and puts the viewer on the slippery slope to voyeurism.

However, even if broadly inaccurate, the Producers' statement does hold a kernel of truth.

It is long past time we stopped treating healthy, surviving marsupial species as furry pests available to make a miserable buck as meat or skins and gave them a measure of justice.

After all, it's their country too and their occupation here predates our own – European or Aboriginal – by hundreds of thousands of years. Or do we continue to begrudge them their evolutionary success in the face of our own struggles with the landscape?

If it becomes absolutely necessary to control their numbers, and only then, it should be done through targeted sterilisation, not by copper jacketed bullets and stomped-on joeys.

Be that as it may, to quote the opening sentence of L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (notably filmed by the same director, Joseph Losey, who initiated *Wake in Fright* as a film project): "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

The truth of which, if we ever manage to outgrow the aberrant propensity for violence towards ourselves and other creatures which has almost come to define our own species, *Wake in Fright* will be there to perennially remind us.

Welcome to Tiboonda, the Yabba and Yindee.

Peter Whittle
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